

Do You Have Their Support? How to Make Informed Decisions Using Focus Groups



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We spend our days making decisions. Often, the consequences of our choices seemingly affect only a handful of stakeholders. Few, for example, would anticipate much praise (or scorn) to follow their selection of a waste management company, although timely garbage removal is certainly important to students and staff. In this instance, the apparent trivial nature of the decision affords us much discretion and invokes limited scrutiny.

Eliciting useful information from stakeholders involves thoughtful questioning and listening—skills that are a bit more complicated than you might think.

Other issues, however, engender considerably more attention. The usual suspects include the decisions we make about our budgets, collective-bargaining agreements, capital projects, and other issues that involve substantial costs or are otherwise controversial (e.g., pouring rights contracts and bus routes). When confronted with such decisions, we do our best to employ Stephen Covey's Habit Five: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." We listen to the views of our board members, union representatives, Parent-Teacher Association officers, and maybe our neighbors. Then, secure in our belief that we have our hand on the community's pulse, we charge ahead.

Regrettably, when we rely on a scattershot approach to gauging stakeholders' opinions, we often find ourselves off the mark. Perhaps, we give too much credence to "squeaky wheels" even though their views do not represent other stakeholders. For instance, we have a colleague whose district shelved a capital project after several "spirited" exchanges with members of a taxpayer association. Ultimately, the district learned of the broader community's support for the project—but not until after the budget vote, when the incentive aid for the project had lapsed.

How can you better predict how various stakeholders will react to proposed district actions? We suggest that you ask them, using a well-planned series of questions in a nonthreatening environment. We call this process conducting a focus group.

In what follows, we describe how you can use focus groups to inform your decisions. You will discover that eliciting *useful* information from stakeholders involves thoughtful questioning and listening—skills that are a bit more complicated than you might think. And if you take the time to develop these skills, you will make better decisions.

Our discussion draws from Richard A. Krueger and Mary Anne Casey's *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, an invaluable resource that outlines the steps necessary to conduct a meaningful focus group.

How to Conduct a Focus Group

Conducting a focus group is not simply a matter of calling people together to talk about an issue. Further, focus groups are not means to share information, express our positions, reach consensus, or facilitate shared decision making with stakeholders; that is what we typically do during board and staff meetings. Instead, conducting a focus group entails bringing together 6–10 people who are representative of a group whose views we would like to understand better, questioning them about an issue, eliciting responses from each participant, listening, and interpreting what we heard.

A simple example will help us illustrate how you can (and should) use focus groups to inform your decision making. Consider the following scenario:

Faced with declining K–12 enrollments, a school board wants to understand how its community and staff would react to three options: (1) consolidate with another district, (2) close the secondary school and tuition out its students to other districts, or (3) do nothing—and continue to have a comparably higher equalized tax rate.

Whom Do You Ask?

Our first task is to identify the stakeholders in the decision. Here, several groups come to mind immediately: students, teachers, administrators, parents, and taxpayers. However, some deeper thinking reveals that these groups are too broad. For example, we could reasonably anticipate that elementary teachers' views would differ from those of secondary teachers regarding the tuition option, since the secondary teachers stand to lose their positions. So, too, might taxpayers' views differ, depending on whether they have children in the district's schools.

To increase the likelihood of our focus groups yielding useful information, it is important that the participants represent a distinct group whose views we want to understand—what researchers term "homogeneous." Homogeneity is important because we want participants to feel comfortable sharing their opinions. Groups composed of participants with different stakes in the issue—in our example, parent taxpayers and nonparent taxpayers—might have conflicting views that limit honest discourse. That is not to suggest that we want all participants to think alike—indeed, we expect members of a stakeholder group to have contrasting opinions among themselves—but we understand that participants will more likely share their views in a nonthreatening environment.

It follows from this point that we will need to conduct several focus groups, each representing a different stakeholder group. Continuing our example, we believe that four stakeholder groups frame the issue: elementary personnel, secondary personnel, parent taxpayers, and nonparent taxpayers.

Conducting separate focus groups with the various stakeholders will afford us the opportunity to compare and contrast multiple opinions about the issue at hand. But conducting only one focus group per stakeholder might offer us only limited insight. What we need is confidence that we have reached *saturation*—the point in the process when we begin to hear the same points over and over, when the stakeholders are not providing new insights into the issue.

To reach this point, we typically need to conduct three to four focus groups with each set of stakeholders:

- Group 1: elementary personnel
- Group 2: secondary personnel
- Group 3: parent taxpayers
- Group 4: nonparent taxpayers

As noted earlier, each focus group should have only

6–10 participants so that each member of the group can share his or her opinions; larger groups make this difficult. We can use a number of strategies to identify the participants, such as staffing records, student records, and taxpayer rolls. However, we want to guard against groups that are biased. Remember, the intent of the focus group is to gather a range of opinions that offer insight into how various stakeholders view the issue.

What Do You Ask?

Once the groups have been identified, we need to develop a line of questioning so that participants' responses will inform our decision. The recommended time for a focus group is one to two hours; if any longer, participants seem to disengage and the utility of conversation declines. Accordingly, we need to be prepared to ask about 10–12 questions, which Krueger and Casey organize as (1) opening questions, (2) introductory questions, (3) transition questions, (4) key questions, and (5) ending questions.

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Opening questions. The purpose of an opening question is to get people comfortable speaking with one another. To do so, we ask everyone to respond to a short, fact-based question that requires no more than a 30-second answer. Because we want to encourage later discussion, we also want to be careful not to ask questions that might privilege one person's opinion over another.

For example, in school settings, we generally don't want to ask participants to reveal their education level, believing that some group members might defer to more educated participants on educational issues. Instead, we might request:

Please share your name and how long you have been living in the district.

Introductory questions. Introductory questions serve to "introduce" the issue—that is, to get participants to reveal what they understand about an issue and their initial thoughts. For example, we might ask parents,

Have you heard that the district is experiencing declining enrollment?

Transition questions. Transition questions enable us to learn participants' initial thoughts about the issue and serve as a link between the introductory question and the key questions that follow. Consider the following:

What was your first reaction when you learned that the district enrollment is declining?

Do you feel that the declining enrollment poses a problem to the community?

If you believe that declining enrollments are problematic, what solutions come to mind?

Key questions. Participants' answers to our key questions are the *raison d'être* for conducting focus groups. In other words, participants' responses to these questions will afford us the greatest insights (in our example) about how they regard the various options the board is considering.

Key questions typically require us to probe each participant's responses so that we best understand his or her comments. However, when we probe, we want to ensure that participants do not feel like they are being interrogated. To do so, we recommended that you ask "Why?" sparingly. Instead, queries like "Can you say more?" will likely prompt further elaboration without seeming confrontational.

Continuing our example, we might use the following key questions and probes:

How would you feel if the district consolidated with another district?

How would you feel if the district closed its secondary school and tuitioned out its students to other districts?

How would you feel if the district maintains its current K–12 structure, although it will have a higher equalized tax rate than neighboring districts?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of each of these options?

Ending questions. Ending questions close the discussion and give participants a final opportunity to share their views. Typically, focus group moderators use a combination of the following types of ending questions:

- The "all things considered" question: *All things considered, if you could advise the board, which option would you recommend it pursue?*
- The "summary" question, asked after the moderator summarizes the discussion: *Does my summary accurately reflect the points that were made in our discussion?*
- The "final" question, to ensure that in planning the focus group we did not miss a critical aspect of the issue: *Is there a point or issue that we did not address today that you feel is important to the debate about how the district should address declining enrollment?*

How Do You Ask (and Listen)?

All focus groups require a moderator—the person who asks the questions and guides the discussion. Ideally, the moderator is someone with whom the participants are fully comfortable sharing their views. Accordingly, you or other administrators may not be suitable moderators. Consider the reluctance that teachers, particularly those

who are untenured, might have sharing with administrators their views about district policies on compensation and promotion.

In our example, participants might believe that district administrators already have a preferred course of action (e.g., do nothing) and will not accurately represent their opinions to the board. This is not to suggest that you cannot serve as moderator but remember, the value of a focus group is to gather accurate information from stakeholders—information that will result only if participants feel comfortable sharing their views. Therefore, we suggest that your moderator be someone who knows the issue well enough to probe participants' responses, but does not limit discussion.

It is also paramount that the moderator refrain from sharing his or her views on the issue—either explicitly by agreeing with a point a participant makes verbally (e.g., I agree) or stating his or her views independently (e.g., I would tuition out students) or implicitly by nodding in affirmation of a participant's comment. Though we want to communicate our respect for participants, we also need to ensure that we do not signal our agreement with a comment. Remember, focus groups are about listening to others' views, not advancing our personal or district's position.

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To facilitate the discussion and ensure that he or she hears all participants' voices, the moderator also needs to be prepared to deal with—as Jerry Seinfeld might say—loud talkers and low talkers. With regard to low talkers, or those who seem reluctant to speak, the moderator can simply say, “We haven't heard from Brian yet. Brian, what do you think about . . . ?” Loud talkers, or those who dominate the conversation, can often be checked by a touch on the arm, or a comment such as, “Thank you, Kara. Let's make sure we have time to hear from the others.”

What Did They Say?

You also want to capture what the group members are saying through an audio recording. Once you have transcribed the audio file, you can then use the transcripts to conduct your analysis. It is also valuable to have someone take notes during the discussion. This assistance will allow you to focus on listening and not worry about capturing both important aspects of the conversation and the nonverbal things that happen, such as when a few parents laugh or roll their eyes. These notes can also help you fill in any gaps if your recorder does not pick up all the details.



Analyzing your data can be the most difficult step and takes time and patience. Keep in mind that your unit of analysis is the group level: what themes came out of your elementary teacher focus groups, rather than what individual teachers said.

A good way to start your analysis is to read through all your transcripts, then come up with a list of words that are used as codes to categorize your data into important themes. Use your knowledge of this situation and previous studies of the topic to guide your coding process, but do not overlook unexpected themes or findings. The old-fashioned “cut-and-paste” method can help you organize your data into thematic categories; there are also a number of useful software packages, such as NVivo 8 and ATLAS.ti, that can facilitate this work.

We Know Just Enough . . .

This discussion only highlights the basic principles and steps of focus group interviewing. We strongly encourage you to read Krueger and Casey's book; we are certain that it will be worth your time.

At this point, you might be thinking that conducting focus groups is a lot of work, and not worth the effort. Yes, focus groups take time and effort, but recall the amount of time and energy you have spent fixing problems that could have been avoided if, before acting, you had taken the time to better understand stakeholders' positions.

We suspect that you would have saved time in the long run—not to mention scoring points for listening.

Reference

Krueger, R. A., and M. A. Casey. 2000. *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications.

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